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LEISURE READING AMONG FOURTH  
AND SIXTH GRADE BOYS

by  
Linda Kissling

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
May 2, 2000

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved May 13, 2000

## ABSTRACT

Linda S. Kissling. *Leisure Reading Among Fourth and Sixth Grade Boys*. 2000. (Under the direction of Dr. Holly G. Willett, Program in School and Public Librarianship.)

This study attempted to determine whether middle school boys read less for leisure than elementary school boys. Forty-eight boys and 45 girls in fourth grade and 48 boys and 52 girls in sixth grade maintained a log for one week to determine how their time outside school was spent and responded to a survey to describe their attitudes toward leisure reading. Time outside school was divided into three categories; personal, including sleeping, eating, and hygiene; structured or demand time, including homework, chores, and sports and music practice; and leisure, including television, reading, time with friends, etc. The survey asked respondents to classify themselves as readers or non-readers. Readers checked preferred reading materials, non-readers gave reasons for not reading. Respondents reported who reads for leisure at home, how often they visit a library, and whether their friends read. Sixth grade boys logged 53.6% of their waking time outside school as leisure time compared to 48.6% for fourth grade boys. Sixth grade girls logged 48.4% leisure time vs. fourth grade girls' 45.5%. Fourth grade boys read 21% of that time while sixth grade boys read only 6.3%; fourth grade girls read 28.5% of their leisure time vs. 14.3% for sixth grade girls.

## MINI-ABSTRACT

Linda S. Kissling. Leisure Reading Among Fourth and Sixth Grade Boys. 2000. (Under the direction of Dr. Holly G. Willett, Program in School and Public Librarianship.)

This study attempted to determine whether middle school boys read less for leisure than elementary school boys. Fourth and sixth grade boys and girls maintained a log of time spent outside school. Fourth grade boys averaged 21% of their leisure time reading for pleasure vs. 6.3% for sixth grade boys.

## Acknowledgements

To my parents who never told me there was anything I could not do

To my friends for their sympathy and encouragement

To my sons who do not support my hypothesis

To my students for their enthusiastic help

To my husband,

cook,

dish-doer,

number-cruncher,

and right- and left-hand man

–if he could only have learned to vacuum–

My most heartfelt thanks and all my love!

## Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
	Acknowledgements	ii
	Table of Contents	iii
	List of Tables	iv
1.	The Problem	1
2.	The Literature Review	8
3.	The Methodology	20
4.	Presentation and Analysis of the Data	25
5.	Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	33
	References	39
	Appendix	43

## List of Tables

Number	Title	Page
Table 1	Mean Hours/Week Students Spent in All Activities	26
Table 2	Percentage of Time Available to Students Outside School for All Activities	27
Table 3	Percentage of Leisure Time Spent in All Activities	27
Table 4	Reasons Non-readers Chose Not to Read	28
Table 5	Kinds of Leisure Reading Materials Preferred by Students Who Choose to Read for Pleasure	29
Table 6	Perception of Whether Friends Read for Pleasure	30
Table 7	Household Members Who Read for Leisure	30
Table 8	Frequency of Library Visits	31

## **Chapter One: The Problem**

### **Introduction and Background**

Over the years I have taught high school English, worked in a busy public library, and raised two sons. I am currently serving my eleventh year as a school library media specialist. Six of those eleven years were in a school serving kindergarten through sixth grade. I am currently in a school serving kindergarten through fourth grade. Every class visits the library every week for regularly scheduled classes designed to encourage reading for fun as well as teach research skills.

All these experiences have given me ample opportunity to observe that as boys enter the middle school years their interest in reading as a leisure activity declines. This was true in my own household, an environment rich with a wide variety of reading materials and two parents engaged daily in reading for enjoyment. Both boys enjoyed being read to and were encouraged to read aloud to us as soon as they were able. Story-time before bed evolved into family reading time as the boys grew older. Yet I sensed that the amount of time my two sons spent reading for leisure diminished.

The district where I am currently employed is a middle- to upper-middle class community. Most households have both parents living at home. In most cases at least one parent has some college education, and many have a good deal more. There is little unemployment. There is a strong and active interest in the public schools, yet parents have expressed the same concerns; the boys' leisure reading declines.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Is this perceived phenomenon true? Do sixth grade boys spend less of their leisure time reading than fourth grade boys? What are sixth grade boys doing in the time when they used to read? While studies support the premise that children's reading declines in middle school, the change is even more significant for boys (Kendrick, 1999; Klein, 1997; Langerman, 1990). Does it matter? What are the implications for boys if they read only assigned school work?



Research reported by Krashen (1993) indicates that children who read independently of school assignments score higher on verbal portions of standardized tests. Fluent readers are more likely to be fluent writers, and writing is an aid in clarifying thought (Krashen, 1993; Millard, 1997). They have better communication skills at their disposal. Leonhardt (1996) asserts that reading allows children to experience a vast range of dilemmas and emotions and allows them to cope with myriad situations vicariously.

### Purpose

Librarians contend that reading is a desirable activity to foster in children so they may become life-long readers. If they simply accept the premise that boys read less without attempting to act upon it, then they are shortchanging them. If boys are indeed reading less, then it is their responsibility to discover why and then take action to make what changes are called for so that boys are not left behind. The purpose of this paper was to determine the differences in how boys in fourth and sixth grades view reading as a leisure activity. A corollary attempted to determine what factors contribute to boys' attitudes toward reading.

This study included fourth and sixth grade students, boys and girls, in the district of Linwood, NJ. The amount of leisure time each age group spent reading was compared. While boys were the primary focus of this study, it was recognized that girls are also undergoing many of the changes that boys experience at this age. If there had been no notable difference in the changes of reading behavior between boys and girls, then the premise that it is boys more often than girls who fall behind would have been unsubstantiated.

The American Library Association's website in October 1999 cited fourth grade as the point after which boys' interest in reading for fun declines. Fourth grade was selected as a basis for comparison because of the statement made by the ALA and because in the sample studied students are not yet in the middle school. Because in Linwood middle school begins with fifth grade, the sixth graders in the study have had more than a year to adapt to the new school environment and, therefore, the initial adjustment to a new school was not a factor.

### Theoretical Framework

There have been hundreds of books and thousands of papers written to aid parents, care givers, and teachers in developing a love of books and reading in children from birth. A survey of a local library's shelves revealed twenty-nine books on the subject. However, only one addressed the continuing need for parent involvement after the end of fourth grade. This is significant because in southern New Jersey most students leave elementary school at the end of fourth or fifth grade. It is common for boys to be unable to read with good comprehension or fluidity until grade four (Rosenthal, 1995). It is almost as though sons are punished by withholding intimate family reading time because they are beginning to read by themselves

Once students reach middle school, their lives begin to change rapidly. The school makes more rigorous demands. Students who may have been used to getting A's and B's may suddenly be seeing B's and C's for all their hard work (Slaughter 1999). They are expected to be able to meet the diverse demands and increased homework assignments of many different teachers in a departmentalized situation rather than having just one or two teachers in a self-contained elementary classroom who may distribute the workload evenly over the week or month.

At the same time as children pass from the relatively intimate and secure elementary school setting and move on to the middle school and its rigors, they are undergoing other physical and emotional changes. In his thoughtful article about the traumas of children moving up to middle school, Slaughter (1999) reminds the reader that "their bodies, thinking abilities, and feelings are changing, often unevenly and unpredictably" (p. 4).

All is not bad news for the early adolescent. There are also more extracurricular activities to tempt the middle schooler. School sports, clubs, and band are some of the new activities to compete for leisure time. Psychologist Robert Havighurst (1972) points out that at this stage (between the ages of ten and thirteen) significant physical changes occur which often result in hyperactivity, moodiness, and irritability. None of these traits is conducive to reading. The combination of readily available physical activities with the physiological inability to remain still for extended periods of time may well be a major factor in the decline of pleasure reading.

Middle school is the time when alliances with friends of the same sex are forged (Slaughter, 1999). Peer pressure becomes a significant influence in what a child will or will not be caught doing. Now is when boys begin to follow same-sex models—fathers, male teachers, most coaches. Until this time role models, especially for reading, have mostly been women—mothers, most elementary teachers, and most librarians (Millard, 1997).

What effects do peer pressure and male reading models have on boys' acceptance of reading for recreation? Numerous studies identify reading as a feminine activity (Klein, 1997; McKenna, 1997; Millard, 1997). A British study (Klein, 1997) reports that pressure is brought to bear, both by peers and by male role models (fathers, coaches, and the like), that boys not be "boffins." A survey of school age children conducted in New Jersey (McKenna, 1997) found that a majority of students regard reading as a girls' activity. Boys are beginning to cleave to their perception of what is masculine. Elaine Millard (1997) discusses gender identity, not as a biological fact, but as a culturally imposed view of what what it is to be male or female. In other words, it is social interaction, not genetics, that determines our expectations of what is masculine or feminine. Certainly young boys approaching manhood will shy from any behavior, such as reading, that would not identify them as men.

While much of the research into the potential turbulence of early adolescence may cause parents, teachers, and librarians to despair, Arthea Reed (1988) urges them to use the children's energy and enthusiasm and help them focus on an avenue to explore their expanding interests. If they know what the children's changing interests are, the adults can tap those interests and direct them to books and other reading materials to satisfy their growing curiosities.

People read, or do not read, for different reasons. Guthrie, Alverson, and Poundstone (1999) divide motivation into four general categories: Intrinsically motivated readers read for the pleasure of it—of getting lost in a story, or of meeting the challenge of a good mystery, or of satisfying one's curiosity about the world around them; extrinsically-motivated readers read for the reward, the sticker, the pat on the back; self-efficacy allows readers to approach new and difficult with confidence—they believe they will meet with

success; social interaction is a fourth motivation for reading wherein students anticipate the pleasure of a shared reading experience with family or friends.

Thus, parents' and teachers' expectations of boys as readers can have significant impact on their reading development. Rosenthal (1995) encourages parents to read with their children, but cautions them not to be overly critical of their reading fluency or interpretation of what is read. If the parent shows any impatience the child will become frustrated and think he or she cannot learn. Palardy (1998) concludes that teachers believe that boys will be less successful than girls in reading; therefore boys are less successful than girls.

Finally, the focus of this paper is on boys and reading. Girls as well as boys are subjected to the changes of middle school life, physiological and emotional growth, and reading materials at school and at home which may not appeal. However, girls are almost unanimously cited by research as more avid readers and more likely to read for enjoyment (McKenna, 1997; Millard, 1997; Simpson, 1996).

### Hypotheses and Questions

Boys and girls in fourth and sixth grades were surveyed in an attempt to support the following hypotheses:

The amount of leisure time boys and girls spend in reading for pleasure is less in sixth grade than in fourth grade.

The amount of time spent reading declines more for boys than for girls.

In order to ascertain these hypotheses, a number of questions were addressed. How much leisure time is available to fourth and sixth grade students? What are students doing during their leisure time? What percentage of leisure time is spent in reading that is not school-assigned? What do boys read? (Magazines? Newspapers? Comic books?) What factors contribute to the desire to read for enjoyment? (Example of other adults or friends? Boredom?) Why do boys not read? (No materials of interest? Peer pressure? Too busy?) What do they do instead? (Sports? Video games? TV? "Hang out" with friends?)

Ninety-three fourth grade students and one hundred sixth grade students in Linwood Public Schools participated in this study. In order to determine what students do

in their leisure time students were asked to keep a log of how their time outside school was spent over a full week, including the weekend. The amount of time spent reading and participating in other activities was measured and compared.

In addition, the same students completed a survey designed to elicit reasons for selecting or rejecting reading as a possible pastime. What do the students choose to read for pleasure? Do the students have opportunities to select independent reading materials? Are these materials readily available? Is there a variety to appeal to varying interests and abilities? Do children see family members; parents, siblings, and other household members modeling reading as a pleasurable activity?

If parents, teachers, and librarians know that boys are reading less and can determine why, then they can take steps to amend how they treat boys and their reading habits.

#### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, reading for pleasure or for leisure is defined as any reading that is indulged in freely and voluntarily, independent of reading that is assigned or required for school.

Middle school is defined as that which follows primary and/or elementary school. In southern New Jersey middle school most commonly begins at fifth or sixth grade. In a kindergarten through eighth grade building it may also refer to the grades in which instruction methods shift from most classes being taught by the homeroom teacher to students moving from class to class for each subject. The researcher examined and compared the reading preferences and habits of fourth graders, still in elementary school in the Linwood School District, with sixth graders attending the middle school.

Aliteracy is defined as a condition which may cause even a fluent reader to choose not to read (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995).

#### Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter Two develops the history of the perceived problems and studies that attempt to define and address them. The administration of the survey and log are discussed in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four the data obtained from the surveys and logs are reported and analyzed in an effort to support the hypotheses proposed herein, that boys read

proportionately less in sixth grade than in fourth and what factors influence the results.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses conclusions drawn from the data and recommendations for further study are offered.

## **Chapter Two: The Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Ten years ago *School Library Journal* guest columnist, Ray Nicolle (1989), created a furor with his article, “Boys and the Five-Year Void.” In it Nicolle, an early reading specialist, claimed that there was nothing to read that would interest boys between the ages of seven and twelve. His primary contention was that those who make the selection of books to be purchased are women—mothers or librarians, the latter of whom most are either female or gay. In addition Nicolle asserted that librarians have “control ... over publishers and [therefore] the availability of suitable children’s literature.”

While Nicolle’s statements were unsubstantiated expressions of his personal opinions (Langerman, 1990), his allegations prompted a closer look at such issues as gender preferences and reading habits among boys and girls. Many teachers, librarians, and researchers looked more closely at what was available and how they might influence boys’ reading selections, thereby maintaining their interest.

A great body of research exists which examines the similarities and differences in how boys and girls view reading as a leisure pursuit, what they choose to read, what influences those choices, and what benefits may be gained by reading. Researchers continue to explore the changing environment of school-aged children, the demands on their time and energy, and how and where reading for pleasure fits in.

### **Physical, Emotional, and Academic Gender Differences**

Arthea Reed (1988) identifies preadolescence as the difficult, in-between age when a student is no longer a child, but not yet an adult. Most fourth graders are still children, although some may have begun puberty. By sixth grade most young people, though not all, have entered that turbulent period where maturation has begun and then progresses at very different rates for each individual. Children begin to experience significant physical changes which often cause embarrassment and self-consciousness as they find themselves becoming different from their friends. These changes, along with a subsequent

diminishing of self-confidence, may foster restlessness, irritability, awkwardness, and rebellion (Havighurst, 1972).

While both girls and boys are experiencing physical changes, those that boys encounter, particularly their rapid growth, make it especially difficult for them to sit still for extended periods of time. Consequently, they often appear hyperactive and clumsy and have difficulty being confined in a traditional classroom setting (Reed, 1988).

A study conducted by Kush and Watkins (1996) finds that boys “dominate all categories of maladjustment.” Boys are much more apt to be diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) than girls. According to Diller (1998) as many as one boy in six between the ages of five and twelve have been diagnosed with it. Writing of the suspected over-prescription of Ritalin, a drug used to control the effects of ADHD, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist George Will asserts, “This is an age that tries to medicalize every difficulty or defect. Gwen Broude. . . of Vassar believes that the rambunctiousness of boys is treated as a mental disorder by people eager to interpret sex differences as personal deficiencies.” Because psychiatric conditions are identified by appearances and because it is difficult to distinguish symptoms of illness from normal variations in life, the statistics concerning boys and their difficulties in school may be skewed.

Even as their bodies begin to change and personal insecurity is on the rise, pre- and early adolescents are also subjected to the additional challenges of middle school and its increased academic demands (Slaughter, 1999). A struggling reader will have less opportunity to interact with any one teacher as he or she will have to hurry on to the next class before the final bell. This has a greater impact on boys than on girls because girls perform better on readiness measures and reading achievement tests (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Kolczynski, 1973).

A wide range of biological reasons for boys performing less well than girls has been forwarded. A 1927 theory suggested that boys’ slower skeletal growth causes difficulties in adapting to the auditory and visual demands of reading (Lincoln, 1927, quoted in Shapiro, 1990, p. 241). Other theories argue that “boys’ brains seem to be more specialized in visuo-spatial ability” which accounts for “boys’ ‘natural’ advantages in science, mathematics, and technological subjects” (Millard, 1997, p. 18). Millard further



states that biological explanations attribute differences in boys' and girls' intellectual growth to boys' slower physiological and psychological maturation.

In addition to the theoretical impact of biological sex differences, social expectations of what boys and girls should be are a major influence on behavior (Millard, 1997). Gender identity begins early, but the greatest need for establishing relationships with peers of the same sex and the emulation of same-sex role models is at the pre- and early adolescent stage of development, just as students are beginning middle school (Reed, 1988). According to social learning theory, children shape their behavior in response to the expectations of adults and peers (Millard). It may be difficult for parents to believe how strong their influence is on their children at this stage, when it seems that all that matters to their children is their acceptance by their peer group (Leonhardt, 1996). Parental modeling of behavior is the most significant factor to effect the kinds of behavior young people will adopt (Millard, 1997; Reed, 1988). This is particularly significant for boys because the primary care-givers, that is parents or baby sitters, scout leaders, and elementary teachers primarily have been women (Millard).

#### Reading Habits and Attitudes

Stephen Krashen prefaces his book, *The Power of Reading* (1993), with the question, "Is there a literacy crisis?" Definitions of what literacy is range from the ability to read at a fourth grade level (Trelease, 1989) to a twelfth grade level (Chall, 1983). According to their website, Literacy Volunteers of America describes functional illiterates as those who cannot read basic signs or maps or fill out a simple form. Their number is estimated at between 21% and 23% of the adult population ([www.literacyvolunteers.org](http://www.literacyvolunteers.org)).

Nevertheless, Krashen (1993) contends that literacy, or the ability to read and write at a rudimentary level, has been increasing steadily in the United States for the last century. Even so, the demand for literacy, the need to read and write, is greater and more complex than ever. It is no longer sufficient to be able merely to decode words and simple sentences. Higher levels of literacy are necessary to function in a rapidly changing, technical society. Kibby (1993) maintains that there is a great number of students finishing high school who do not have the reading proficiency or capabilities to meet the demands of their future educational or work-related goals. In this light, although more people may be

reading at a basic level, that level is no longer sufficient to function in society or prepare for the modern workplace.

But even if illiteracy is not a problem, aliteracy may be (Kibby, 1993; Krashen, 1993; Trelease, 1989). Aliteracy is the choice of an otherwise fluent reader not to read (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). In *Becoming a Nation of Readers* Anderson, Heibert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) asserted that reading, particularly the reading of books, is where children gain knowledge about sentence structure, literary forms, and a vast range of topics, the awareness of which hones comprehension and critical thinking, as well as vocabulary growth and reading fluency. Young people for whom the ability to read, to draw inferences, to think critically, and to express themselves clearly verbally or in writing, are not reading. The problem is not that young people, particularly in middle school and high school, cannot read, but that they will not read (Copperman, 1986).

Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1986) examined second and fifth graders' logs of minutes per day each participant read outside school. They concluded that by fifth grade a child's reading level and the growth of his or her reading proficiency between second and fifth grades are directly related to the amount of time spent in reading books. If children are not reading regularly before they reach middle school, they will have considerably more difficulty in managing the demands of school and of later life.

A study of attitudes toward academic and recreational reading indicate that there are no significant differences among boys and girls in grades one through three (Cloer & Pearman, 1992). However, in fourth through sixth grades, boys' scores dropped significantly on both academic and recreational reading attitudes, and girls' scores dropped on academic attitudes. A national survey of children in grades one through six found that attitudes dropped steadily from a positive view of both academic and leisure reading to relative indifference by grade six (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Kush and Watkins (1996) revealed that while girls expressed more positive attitudes toward recreational reading than boys, both girls and boys attitudes about reading declined over three years of testing, between second and fourth grades. The study augments a growing body of evidence regarding boys' negative attitude toward reading.

A survey of seventh grade boys found that the majority do not read unless required to do so by the teacher and do not enjoy reading (Kendrick, 1999). One reason suggested as why young people dislike reading is because they equate reading with ridicule or failure (Reed, 1988). Boys are far more likely than girls to require remediation for reading (Hall & Coles, 1997).

To further muddy the waters, many children and adults regard reading as a feminine activity. McKenna (1997) found that the most dramatic increase in this perception occurs around grade five when “only girls read books.” Klein (1997) contends that boys’ reading declines as a result of their need to be seen as masculine. Millard (1997) addresses the proliferation of written and pictorial representations of readers as females, in advertisements, on greeting cards, and in the very books boys and girls read. Will (1999) cites Danielle Crittenden of the Independent Women’s Forum who claims much modern children’s literature is “bland gruel” because “there is zero tolerance for male adventurousness.” Crittenden claims it is an “‘anti-boy lobby’ behind hand wringing about the supposed dangers of reading the Harry Potter novels, which feature witchcraft, wizardry, and other neat stuff.” Will writes, “The Potter books recall those traditional boys books that satisfied boys’ zeal for strife and adventure. Today, Crittenden says, that zeal causes therapists. . .to reach for the Ritalin.”

Young adult novelist Robert Lipsyte (1992) states, “boys aren’t really allowed to read, not good books, anyway, about relationships or feelings. . . . Boys are allowed to read about conquering the world or gluing balsa plane models or scoring from second, but not anything that might help them or the planet in later life” (p. 290).

If boys enjoy what they read, they will read more (Ujiie, 1996) and with better comprehension (Krashen, 1993). Some literature maintains that so much of the assigned or required reading is of the sort that appeals more to girls, that is, books that deal with interpersonal relationships and emotions, with little action or physical adventure (Kendrick, 1999). Author Todd Strasser contended in a lecture at the EMAnj conference on 26 October 1999 that boys soon forget that reading ever was fun and they begin to think that the books available to them now that they are in middle school are insipid and without any

action or adventure. Are parents, teachers, and librarians allowing boys the freedom to select reading materials that appeal to them?

In studies where students record the amount of reading completed over a given period of time, girls always have read more books or more minutes than boys (Simpson, 1996). A British survey of boys and girls aged ten, twelve, and fourteen showed a decline in the number of books read in each successive age group with boys reading about one third less than girls in each group (Hall & Coles, 1997). The survey also compared the amount of reading done with a survey originally conducted in 1971 with the newer one completed in 1994. Reading levels in the older survey showed a similar decline. Additionally, Hall and Coles report another such study conducted in 1940 which described the same pattern.

### Reading Preferences

Does the gender of main characters or of the author, the genre, the subject matter, or the medium make a difference in what boys are willing to read? J.K. Rowling, the author of the wildly popular *Harry Potter* books, disclosed in an October 1999 television interview that her publisher recommended that she use her initials rather than her name so that boys would read her works. Mary Watson (1985) reports that girls tend to read more books by women authors and boys more books by men. Similarly, a study by Mary Ann Harkrader and Richard Moore (1997) found that girls prefer female main characters and boys prefer male main characters. Myriad studies have been aimed at the genres of choice for boys and girls throughout elementary and middle school. Nothing in any of the literature reviewed disputed the hypothesis that boys and girls have different reading preferences. Some studies, such as that conducted by Cathy Byrne (1998), state that girls are willing to read books labeled as “boy” books, but that the reverse is not true.

Most studies indicate that boys prefer non-fiction (Lipsyte, 1992; Watson, 1985). Harkrader (1997) found that both boys and girls in a fourth grade study preferred fiction, although girls showed a stronger preference than boys. Simpson (1992) found that girls read more and that they read narrative fiction almost exclusively. Boys read less, but in a much wider range of genres. Boys and girls enjoy fantasy (Harkrader, 1997; Klein, 1997; Simpson, 1996), science fiction (Harkrader, 1997), adventure (Simpson, 1996), and

humor (Harkrader, 1997; Klein, 1997; Simpson, 1996). Sports books, always at or near the top of boys' lists, are finding greater readership among girls (Harkrader, 1997). Boys prefer informational (nonfiction) reading much more strongly than girls (Harkrader, 1997; Lipsyte, 1992), although girls like certain non-fiction reading, such as horse and craft books (Harkrader, 1997; Simpson, 1996).

Much of the literature supports the assertion that boys prefer books with male characters and books written by men, that is, "boy" books; girls prefer female characters and books written by women, "girl" books (Harkrader, 1997; Lipsyte, 1992; Watson, 1985). The fact that J.K. Rowling is known by her initials and not by her given name gives particular weight to that claim. Some writers and researchers claim that girls are more likely to read "boy" books, but that boys will not read "girl" books (Harkrader, 1997; Lipsyte, 1992; Simpson, 1996). Greenbaum (1999) reports that the boys in her sophomore English class label "girl" books as books about love or about family problems.

While much attention is paid to genre, many other factors influence reading selection. A study of students in grades three through eight revealed factors such as size of print, the length of the book, and a story line already familiar to the student (Greaney, 1999). Boys claimed to be most influenced by the book's cover, author, and topic; girls by the blurb. None claimed to be strongly influenced by recommendations, whether by parents, teachers, or peers.

### Reading for Pleasure

Today's children and adolescents have more demands on their time than ever before (Leonhardt, 1996). Even preschoolers have gymnastics and art classes. As young people progress through school and gain more freedom to travel to friends' houses, attend sports practices, and join clubs, the amount of leisure time available for such pursuits as reading decreases.

Television viewing is most often cited as the reason young people are reading less. Krashen (1993), whose book is a compilation of many different studies about reading, reveals that research does not support that hypothesis. Television viewers read just as much as non viewers. In fact some TV viewing may even stimulate or redirect what is read. Heath and DeWitt (1994) found that young children are more likely to choose

television as a leisure pastime, but as children approach adolescence they prefer to spend time with friends, and the television is turned off.

Major factors contributing to the pursuit of reading for pleasure are the availability of diverse reading materials, the opportunity, or time, to read, and the opportunity to share and discuss what has been read (Kendrick, 1999). One factor that contributes to the apparent decline of reading among boys is what parents, teachers, and librarians consider “reading.” Wheeler (1984) studied the reading habits of a number of boys whose mothers had expressed concern about the boys reading less. The mothers were using novels as their measuring stick. Wheeler’s findings disclosed that the boys were reading as much as before, but the reading materials had changed. Their sons were reading the sports page and the comics, magazines, baseball cards, and books that evaluated the cards’ values.

A study of middle school boys determined that boys who reported more reading of comic books also found reading in general to be more pleasurable and were also reading more books (Ujiie, 1996). Light reading, such as of comics, jokes, and even baseball cards, can serve as a conduit to heavier or more challenging reading by providing motivation and developing competence (Krashen, 1993).

Newspapers are a medium which appeals to preadolescent boys (Heath & DeWitt, 1994). While girls are comfortable and content in imaginary worlds, boys need to be connected to the concrete (Watson, 1985). Newspaper reading does that. The most often read sections are sports, comics, entertainment, and the front page (Heath & DeWitt, 1994). Newspapers are portable, easy to browse, and readily accessible.

Children who are able to select their own reading materials have more positive attitudes toward reading and read more independently (Ciccone, 1981). Parents, teachers, and librarians must set aside their own preferences and prejudices about what boys and girls should be reading. It does no good to attempt to lead a student to a book if he or she has no interest in it at all (Krashen, 1993). Adults need to be more tolerant of the differences in reading choices of students, and of boys in particular, if they hope to engage students in reading. Homes, classrooms, and libraries should be liberally salted with diverse reading materials to tempt any chance reader (Leonhardt, 1996). Krashen cites

numerous studies outlining ways to encourage free voluntary reading at home and at school.

Opportunities for reading must abound. As children mature and have more freedom to participate in activities outside the home, it is more difficult for many of them to find the time for leisure reading. Copperman (1986) describes how to establish a Family Reading Program, beginning with preschoolers, and continuing on through adolescence. Sustained silent reading (SSR) is an invaluable component of skill development (Trelease, 1989). Beyond that, it is an opportunity to experience reading as recreation, indulged in along with peers and adult models.

To derive pleasure from reading, it is important to share and discuss what has been read (Copperman, 1986; Leonhardt, 1996; Trelease, 1989). Because reading is often identified as a feminine activity, girls are free to discuss all manner of reading with their friends. Boys, fearing ridicule, do not admit to indulging in such an activity (Klein, 1997). Parents, teachers, and librarians can still overcome these stigmas by making a wide variety of reading materials available, not just “typical” print media, such as novels, but shorter works, chapters, news clippings, advertisements, and so on, guiding boys to supplemental reading that will enhance an existing interest, and by providing the opportunity to discuss what has been read (Guthrie, et al, 1999). Discussion enhances comprehension of materials read and develops the reader’s confidence in his reading abilities.

Parents of older children frequently stop reading to them once they can read for themselves. But there is so much more yet to be gained from shared reading experiences (Rosenthal, 1995). Family reading time as outlined by Copperman (1986) provides quiet time for busy kids to sit and read for fun. They share that time with family members who are providing positive role models for reading. Peer pressure and the need to identify with male role models make leisure reading taboo for many boys. Boys need to see other boys and male adults indulge in reading (Krashen, 1993).

#### Impact of Adults on Children’s Reading for Pleasure

Teachers are often accused of disparaging boys’ choices of reading materials (Klein, 1997). Even well-intentioned teachers and researchers can inadvertently signal students that certain types of reading are valued more than others. Simpson (1996)

discovered that a young teacher whom she was observing and whom she describes as “committed to social justice and equity, and particularly alert to gender issues” was doing the very thing she was striving so hard to overcome—she was more demonstrative in her approval of girls’ reading selections and comments than she was of the boys’ (p. 270).

Boys and girls read for different reasons. Most successful readers are those who like to read and read independently for enjoyment (Guthrie, Alverson, & Poundstone, 1999). But that does not mean that those who do not readily pick up a book on their own cannot be successful. Teachers, librarians, and parents have an opportunity to engage nonreaders by helping them find the connections and relevance to things that are important to them, extended activities, reading for a purpose that is of value to the student (Copperman, 1986; Guthrie, et al, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Leonhardt, 1996).

While schools traditionally carry the responsibility for creating readers, the home and family must set the tone. Kush and Watkins (1996) state that children’s academic attitudes are related to home literacy practices which occur before formal schooling even begins and to parental attitudes toward reading.

Boys especially need the reading role model (Canfield, 1999). A study of boys for the six months prior to entering first grade was conducted to determine the influence of fathers versus mothers reading to boys and the subsequent success in reading achievement by the end of first grade (Henry, 1974). Boys whose fathers read to them scored significantly higher mean scores than did boys who were read to by their mothers. Most studies document mother-child relationships, but when fathers were involved in reading to sons, the boys showed a higher reading achievement (Martin, 1991).

Differences between boys’ and girls’ behavior in school and their abilities in various areas of academics are well substantiated. Although the type of reading girls most often pursue, the narrative fiction, is the likely reason for girls in elementary and middle school to outperform boys in areas of literacy, questions are raised as to the value of such reading practices socially and/or politically (Simpson, 1996). When boys read, they are reading a broad range of materials, including expository and informational texts. The kind of reading boys indulge in reflects the reading done by their fathers (Wheeler, 1984). Just



as boys are encouraged to read fiction, so ought girls be engaged in non-fiction and other genres (Simpson, 1996).

### Need for the Study

Literature supports the premise that reading books and other materials of interest increases the likelihood of reading, increases the time spent reading, and leads to greater success in reading and language development. There is a correlation between reading and the ability to express oneself in speaking and writing and to think critically (Harkrader, 1997).

The literature documents many studies conducted over time and over a wide spectrum of students of differing backgrounds. While the information available from these studies is useful in tracking trends, statistical findings do not necessarily fit all groups. Parents of students in the Linwood School District have expressed concern over their children reading less in middle school than they did in elementary school. Parents of boys were particularly concerned. This study specifically targeted fourth and sixth grade students in the Linwood District.

The hypothesis was that middle school students, especially boys, read less than they were perceived to in fourth grade. If the hypothesis is supported by this study, then teachers, parents, and librarians will be better prepared to close the gap. If these adults know what the children's interests are and how their time is being spent, they will be able to anticipate new areas of interest. They will be better able to help students find diverse suitable materials to read, help them find the time to read, and provide them the opportunity to talk about what they are reading.

### Study Design

This study attempted to describe the leisure habits of fourth and sixth grade students in Linwood, NJ. To determine if sixth graders read less than fourth graders, approximately one hundred twenty students in each grade were asked to maintain a log recording how their time was spent outside school for one week. The log determined how much time was spent reading for recreation, as well as what other activities filled the students' time. A survey of the same two groups of students was used to determine the students' attitudes toward reading.

Results of the fourth grade and sixth grade responses were compared by grade level. In addition, responses of boys and girls in each grade were compared by grade level to determine gender differences in attitudes and in activities pursued.

The study has taken into account the varied reading materials of boys and girls. Most of the literature reviewed was concerned with books only.

While there were limitations to the self-response methods of research, the survey and log were the most practical tools for involving all the students in the target group within the time-frame allotted to this study.

## **Chapter Three: The Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This study attempted to confirm the hypothesis that boys spend less time reading during their leisure as they approach adolescence; specifically, that boys in sixth grade spend proportionately less of their leisure time reading than boys in fourth grade. Because many of the factors that may influence such a change also effect girls, such as acquiring greater freedom as they mature and contending with greater demands on their time as they advance in school, this study also investigated the amount of leisure reading done by girls in fourth and sixth grades.

How much time students spend reading was compared to the amount of time spent in other pursuits. Additionally, the students were asked what kind of reading materials they prefer when they read for pleasure.

### **Design of the Study**

The study was designed to discover the percentage of leisure time boys and girls in fourth and sixth grades spend reading and participating in other activities. How many hours were available outside school to fourth and sixth graders? How much of that time was spent doing homework, chores, and attending personal needs, such as eating, dressing, and bathing? How were the remaining hours filled? How did the amount of time spent reading compare with other activities of choice? What kinds of materials did these young people read other than books?

In order to document how time out of school was spent, students were asked to maintain a log of their activities for the period of one week, including one weekend. To further investigate the students' attitudes toward reading, they were also administered a brief survey. The instruments selected for this study were similar to those used in other studies of students' leisure time activities and attitudes towards reading.

### Population

The population of the study was all fourth and sixth grade students, male and female, in the Linwood Public Schools, approximately one hundred students in each grade. The study included special education students as well as regular education and gifted students.

Linwood is a middle- to upper middle-class, professional community in Atlantic County, New Jersey. The state of New Jersey rates schools according to socioeconomic levels based on such criteria as educational level of parents, income per household, and property values. Categories in the District Factor Group range from A, the poorest, to J, the wealthiest. According to the New Jersey School Report Cards released February 16, 2000 Linwood has a District Factor Group rating of GH, the highest rating in Atlantic County. Education is a priority among residents. The children are encouraged to succeed in school and get the most out of every opportunity.

The sample population was a small one and not typical of all fourth and sixth grade students. This population was selected because the researcher was able to administer both instruments in person, thereby eliminating possible variations in the presentation of the instruments. Time constraints made examining a small local population the most efficient way of obtaining responses. While surveys are often not the most accurate method of obtaining factual data, in this instance the students' perceptions and attitudes were of interest to the study more than who, for example, really reads the most in a household.

### Instrumentation

Two instruments were utilized in order to determine how fourth and sixth graders spent time outside school and how those students viewed reading as one of those activities. Both instruments, a log and a survey, were presented to the participants in their classrooms by the researcher (see Appendix). The survey was written on a single page. The researcher read each question to the students in an effort to ensure that all questions were interpreted as nearly the same way as possible. If there were any questions from the participants they were addressed at once and clarified for all at the same time.

Participants were identified only by grade and gender. They were asked their impression of who, if anyone, in their household reads in their free time; father, mother,

older or younger sister or brother, grandparent, or any other member in the household. They were asked whether their friends read for pleasure. Frequency of library visits were also investigated, as well as whether the respondent visited a library at all. Finally, the respondent was asked whether he or she reads for fun. If the response was positive, then there was the opportunity to record the types of reading enjoyed, such as books, magazines, newspapers, comics, manuals relating to outside hobbies or interests, how-to materials, or any other type of reading which may appeal to the respondent. If the response was negative, the respondent was given a list of possible reasons why, such as; there is no time in the day to read, friends do not read, reading is too boring, there are no good books, and there is nothing in the house to read. There was also a space in which to write any other possible reason he or she might have had to offer.

The researcher also instructed the students how to complete the log. The instrument consisted of a grid showing the days of the week on one axis and the hours of the day in half hour increments on the other axis. Respondents were given a list of activities that they might pursue throughout the day, before and after school and on the weekend. Grid, instructions, and the list of possible activities were all on one page for convenience and ease of use. Respondents were asked to fill the block representing each half hour of each day with the activity that most filled that block of time. Options included homework, chores, personal care such as bathing, or dressing, eating, participation in sports, either games or practice, music lessons or practice, reading, television viewing, playing games alone or with family or friends, including video games, club activities such as church groups or scouting, time with friends such as phoning, visiting, movies, or the trips to the park, and attending religious services or training. Anything else that had not been covered in the list of suggested activities could be listed on the back of the log. The log was designed to take a few minutes each day to complete.

#### Data Collection

Students completed the survey and returned it immediately to the researcher. Next, the log was distributed to the students and a practice log was completed. Students were then asked to take the log home and record the day's activities each evening for one week.

They were encouraged to share the project with parents if they had any difficulties in making entries. After seven days the students returned the logs to school.

Fourth grade students were given the instructions for participation by the researcher during their class's regularly scheduled time in the library media center. Fourth grade homeroom teachers assisted in encouraging the students to maintain the log each day. After each class had recorded seven days of activities, the logs were turned in to the library in a collection box designed to ensure anonymity.

Sixth grade students were given the survey and log by the researcher during their regular social studies class period. All students were surveyed in one day. The social studies teacher reminded students daily to maintain the logs and collected them at the end of one week in a similar collection box. Late logs were collected in the middle school's library to further ensure anonymous participation.

A cover letter on Rowan University stationery informed parents of the purpose of this research. In addition, they were invited to encourage their children to complete the log and assist where possible (see Appendix).

#### Data Analysis Plan

Data collected from the surveys were compiled to determine attitudes toward reading. Interests of girls in each grade were compared with those of boys in each grade, boys in fourth grade with boys in sixth grade, and girls in fourth grade with girls in sixth grade. It was then possible to determine any changes in attitudes and perceptions between groups by gender and by grade.

Data collected from the logs were used to determine actual time spent in various activities among girls in each grade and boys in each grade. The amount of leisure time available to each grade level was determined. The percentage of time spent in various leisure activities of each group was calculated and compared across grade levels and genders with particular attention to reading as a leisure pursuit.

#### Summary

The log enabled the researcher to discover what students in the targeted age groups do outside school and how much of that time was available to freely select their activities. The survey gave the researcher some insight as to what outside factors might influence

students' choices to read or not and how accessible reading materials were. Including the entire population of the the fourth and sixth graders in the district in the research project gave the most accurate picture of their leisure habits and attitudes towards reading. Chapter Four presents the results of the research.

## **Chapter Four: Presentation and Analysis of the Data**

### Introduction

In order to determine whether students read more or less in sixth grade than in fourth grade, it was necessary to discover how much time for reading and for other leisure activities is available to each group of students. Ninety-three fourth graders, 48 boys and 45 girls, and 100 sixth graders, 48 boys and 52 girls, participated in the study. Students maintained a log for one week to account for their time outside school. A separate survey was administered to plumb students' attitudes towards reading as an activity they might pursue voluntarily.

### Log Results

The log's grid accounted for 32.5 hours in school and allowed 56 hours of sleep, eight hours per night for one week, leaving 79.5 hours for students to record in half hour blocks how their time was spent. Four main categories of time were designated—sleep, time required for attending personal needs, structured or “demand” time, and leisure time. Personal needs included eating meals and snacks, changing clothes, and attending personal hygiene. Structured time referred to demands that are made on students' time, such as for homework, chores, organized sports games and practices, music lessons and practice, clubs, and religious services and instruction. The remaining hours were considered leisure time.

Table 1 shows the average number of hours per week students spent in the various categories of time. Fourth grade boys and girls slept more than sixth graders. Sixth grade boys and girls spend more time in personal care than fourth graders with girls in each grade taking more time than boys. Both sixth grade boys and girls spent fewer hours each week on homework than their counterparts in grade four.

Boys in both grades spent substantially more hours in games or activities than the girls. Fourth grade girls and boys spent nearly the same amount of time in casual interaction with their friends, while sixth graders spent considerably more casual time with



friends, girls reporting more than twice as many hours “hanging” or just talking with friends as fourth grade girls. Time spent watching TV increased for sixth graders and was the activity most pursued by sixth grade boys. Sixth grade girls spent most time with friends, just slightly more than watching TV. Fourth grade boys spent most of their time outside school watching television. The two activities most pursued by fourth grade girls were TV watching and reading for pleasure after extra hours for sleep.

Hours spent reading declined for both boys and girls between fourth and sixth grades while available (leisure) time increased. Girls in each grade logged more hours of reading than boys, but the gap increased in sixth grade. In fourth grade boys spent about 80% of the time reading that girls did, while in sixth grade boys’ reading dropped to 50% of the girls’ time.

Table 1

Mean Hours per Week Students Spent in All Activities (N=79.5)

Category of time	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
School	32.5	32.5	32.5	32.5
Personal needs				
Sleep <sup>a</sup>	12.5	12.5	10.0	9.8
Meals	7.8	7.5	9.8	6.9
Personal care	5.1	6.9	6.9	8.3
Structured time				
Homework	6.6	7.1	6.0	6.3
Chores	1.9	1.6	1.5	3.0
Sports <sup>b</sup>	4.1	3.9	3.0	2.2
Music	1.0	1.7	0.0	2.6
Religious instruc.	2.0	1.8	1.7	1.9
Leisure time				
Games <sup>c</sup>	10.2	6.8	11.6	5.3
Clubs	.3	.4	.6	.8
Reading	8.1	10.3	2.7	5.5
TV	12.6	10.3	17.6	12.4
Friends <sup>d</sup>	5.8	5.5	8.5	12.7
Special events	1.6	2.9	1.6	1.8

<sup>a</sup>Hours of sleep are in addition to 56 hours per week. <sup>b</sup>Sports refers to organized sports practices, games, and instruction. <sup>c</sup>Games include pick-up games with friends, hobbies, etc. <sup>d</sup>Time with friends refers to unstructured time, such as talking on the phone, emailing, “hanging out” together, etc.

While Table 1 shows actual hours spent reading and doing other activities, Table 2 shows the percentage of time spent outside school in each category. The total amount of time spent attending to personal needs is slightly less for sixth grade boys and girls than for fourth graders. While there was little difference in the amount of structured time demanded of girls in each grade, there is a 21.5% decline in structured time for boys between fourth and sixth grades and sixth grade boys read 24.5% less time than girls in either grade. Sixth grade boys and girls both logged more leisure time than fourth grade boys and girls.

Table 2

Percentage of Time Available to Students Outside School for All Activities

Kind of time	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Personal needs	32.0	33.8	30.4	31.5
Structured time	19.6	20.0	15.4	20.1
Leisure time	48.6	45.5	53.6	48.4

Note. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Table 3 shows what proportion of leisure time is spent in various activities. The most dramatic change was decline in the percentage of time spent reading between fourth grade and sixth grade. Sixth grade boys and girls watch more television and spend more time with friends than fourth grade boys and girls.

Table 3

Percentage of Leisure Time Spent in Various Activities

Activity	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Games	26.4	18.8	27.2	13.8
Clubs	.8	1.1	1.4	2.1
Reading	21.0	28.5	6.3	14.3
TV	32.6	28.5	41.3	32.2
Friends	15.0	15.0	20.0	33.0
Special events	4.0	8.0	3.8	4.7

Note. Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

### Survey Results

Students in fourth and sixth grades rated themselves as readers or non-readers. Among fourth graders responding, two boys and one girl claimed that they do not read at all, compared to six boys and three girls among sixth grade respondents. Table 4 shows the reasons given for not reading. Students checked all choices that applied. The most often reasons given were that the student was either too busy to read or that he or she found reading too boring. Sixth grade boys cited the greatest variety of reasons they do not read. They were the only group to include “friends don’t read” as a reason they do not read, and in each instance at least one other reason was given as well.

Table 4

#### Reasons Non-readers Chose Not to Read

Reason	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys (n=2)	Girls (n=1)	Boys (n=6)	Girls (n=3)
Too busy	2	1	4	3
Too boring	2	1	5	2
Nothing in home to read	0	0	3	1
Nothing written	0	1	4	1
Friends don’t read	0	0	2	0
Other	0	0	1 <sup>a</sup>	0

<sup>a</sup>Explanation of “other” response was “don’t know.”

All other respondents rated themselves as readers. Any kind of reading that was not required for school or other structured or “demand” activities, such as Hebrew School, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine training (CCD), or tutoring was counted. Among fourth graders, 46 of the 48 boys responding, or 95.8%, and 44 of 45 girls, or 97.8% considered themselves to be readers. Among sixth graders, 42 of 48 boys, or 87.5%, and 49 of 52 girls, or 94.2% called themselves readers. Girls proclaimed themselves to be more likely to read for leisure than the boys did in each grade. The survey showed a lower percentage of readers in sixth grade among both boys and girls. Whereas there was only 3.6% difference between girl readers in the two grades, the percentage of boy readers dropped 8.3%.

Table 5 shows the variety of reading materials students preferred by students who rated themselves as readers. Respondents selected all that applied. Among fourth graders, girls showed a slightly stronger preference for books and magazines than boys, and boys showed a slightly stronger preference for expository writings (manuals and how-to's) and computer/Internet reading than girls. Among sixth graders, almost twice as many girls as boys chose to read books, and girls preferred magazines and computer/Internet reading more strongly than boys. Girls' reading preferences changed little between fourth and sixth grades. Boys' preferences for books and for computer-related reading dropped significantly from fourth to sixth grade, with slightly more than half the sixth grade boys selecting books over fourth grade boys and almost 75% fewer sixth grade boys using the computer for leisure reading. Other reading interests remain similar. Sixth grade boys are more likely to read comics or magazines than books. Books were the preferred reading of fourth graders and books and magazines the strong choice of sixth grade girls.

Table 5

Kinds of Leisure Reading Materials Preferred by Students Who Choose to Read for Pleasure

Reading materials	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys (n=46)	Girls (n=44)	Boys (n=42)	Girls (n=49)
Books	40	44	22	41
Magazines	38	42	37	49
Newspapers	23	25	22	23
Manuals, how-to's <sup>a</sup>	17	12	16	17
Comics	29	31	26	27
Computer <sup>b</sup>	22	15	6	17
Collectors cards	5	7	3	2

<sup>a</sup>Includes recipes, direction, hobby-related materials. <sup>b</sup>Includes Internet surfing, email, and other leisure computer uses.

Students were asked whether they thought their friends read for enjoyment. Table 6 shows how respondents perceive their friends' reading habits. Fourth grade girls rated most or some of their friends as readers. No fourth grade girl thought that none of their friends read. Fourth and sixth grade boys and sixth grade girls rated their friends in very

similar ways. Among boys in each grade 6% thought that most of their friends did not read compared to 2% of sixth grade girls.

Table 6

Perception of Whether Friends Read for Pleasure

Friends read	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Most	12	22	11	14
Some	31	23	31	36
None	5	0	6	2

Table 7 shows who in the respondents' households reads in their leisure time. Only one respondent, a sixth grade boy, said that no one read in his home. Both genders in both grades reported seeing mothers reading more than fathers. Sixth grade boys reported more younger brothers reading than younger sisters, but in every other category, more females were represented as reading at home than their male counterparts.

Table 7

Household Members Who Read for Leisure

Household readers	Fourth Grade		Sixth Grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Parent				
Mother	42	49	39	51
Father	36	36	37	44
Sibling				
Older sister	8	16	14	12
Older brother	6	10	11	9
Younger sister	12	13	7	13
Younger brother	3	11	11	11
Grandparent				
Grandmother	4	5	3	3
Grandfather	2	1	0	1
No one	0	0	1	0
Other <sup>a</sup>	1	1	0	0

<sup>a</sup>Other household readers were one aunt, one cousin, and one sitter.

Table 8 shows how often, if ever, respondents visit either the school or the public library. Even if the purpose of the visit was not related to reading or borrowing materials, such as to use email or accompany a parent or friend, it was to be included. Both school buildings have libraries and full-time librarians. The elementary school students have classes scheduled weekly in the media center. The middle school has flexible scheduling; therefore, students are not in the media center on a regular schedule. However, all teachers schedule time in the library each of the four marking periods. In addition, middle school students have the freedom to visit the library before and after school, at lunchtime, and during study halls. The last two options are not available to elementary students. A bike path runs the full length of Linwood, making the local public library easily and safely accessible to many fourth graders and most sixth graders.

Table 8

Frequency of Library Visits

Frequency of visits	<u>Fourth Grade</u>		<u>Sixth Grade</u>	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Once or more a week	46	45	13	19
Twice a month	1	0	9	9
Once a month	0	0	12	11
Less than once a month	1	0	11	2
Never	0	0	2	0

Summary

Sixth grade boys logged the most leisure time and the least amount of leisure reading of the three groups of students studied. Sixth graders have more time available to them outside school, in part because they spend less time sleeping than fourth graders. Sixth grade boys recorded notably less structured time—homework, practices, chores—than fourth grade boys and girls in either grade. Therefore, even while more time is available to sixth grade boys than any other group, they spend the least time reading.

At the same time, even though they are reading less than girls in either grade and less than fourth grade boys, 87.5% of the sixth grade boys consider themselves to be

readers. They are more likely to read comics or magazines than books. Books were still a strong choice for all other groups. Reading materials were available in the homes, and libraries were accessible. Only two sixth grade boys said they never visit a library. As for possible influences of friends and family, only one sixth grade boy said no one in his household reads and only two sixth grade boys said that a reason they do not read is because their friends do not read. Television viewing was a primary activity for all groups, but especially for sixth grade boys. Time with friends was significantly more important among sixth graders. But reading is indulged in. Nearly all students reported reading something on their own.

## **Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Summary**

There is an almost universal perception among adults who live and work with elementary and middle school children that the amount of leisure reading entered into by middle school students is less than that of fourth grade students. Parents, teachers, and librarians have particularly remarked that the amount of reading outside school assignments appears to decline significantly more among boys. If this is true, why is it so? Do middle school students have greater demands on their time than elementary students? Do they have a greater homework load, more sports and clubs activities available, or more chores and other tasks, such as babysitting, that require their time? Are there fewer books and other reading materials available that appeal to the middle grades students? In what ways are circumstances different for girls? Or does this perceived decline of leisure reading not really exist?

To determine if middle school students read less than elementary students, fourth and sixth graders in Linwood, NJ maintained a log for one week in March 2000 to account for how they spent their time outside school. Only logs which were filled in completely were used in the study. Ninety-three fourth graders, 48 boys and 45 girls, and 100 sixth graders, 48 boys and 52 girls, were included, representing 88% of the students in both grades. In addition, surveys completed by the same 193 students gave some insight into their reading preferences, the availability of materials, and the demonstration of leisure reading of other household members.

### **Conclusions**

The logs strongly supported the hypothesis that boys read less than girls and that sixth grade boys read less than fourth grade boys. Reading time was calculated two ways, both by number of hours spent reading and by the percentage of free or leisure time spent reading. The latter allowed for anticipated differences in the amount of time available to



each group and how much of that time students chose to read for pleasure. Both methods showed a sharp decrease in reading time between fourth and sixth graders over all, and particularly between boys in each grade. Girls' reading declined between fourth and sixth, but not by as great an amount.

The researcher anticipated that sixth graders would have less leisure time and more demand (or structured time) than fourth graders. The assumption was made that, although sixth graders were likely to sleep less, they would have to spend more time on homework, chores, organized sports, and music. However, it was found that among this group sixth grade boys reported 5% more leisure time than fourth grade boys, and sixth grade girls reported 2.9% more leisure time than fourth grade girls. Fourth grade boys reported 4.2% more time spent on demand activities than sixth grade boys. The difference between girls in each grade was minimal. Girls in each grade reported more demands on their time in each grade than boys. Sixth graders confirmed that they sleep less, and that they spent fewer hours on homework than fourth graders. The difference may be in the habits of the two groups, not just related to school year. Perhaps the same sixth grade students had spent less time on homework when they were in fourth grade, also. Sixth grade girls spent more time doing chores and babysitting than fourth grade girls, but the older boys spent less time doing chores than the fourth grade boys. Surprisingly, sixth grade boys and girls both spent less time participating in organized sports than fourth graders. While sixth grade girls spent slightly more time studying music, sixth grade boys spent less than students in fourth grade. Sixth graders had more access to club activities. The increase in time spent in clubs roughly doubled for boys and girls, but the increase averaged only one half hour for boys and one hour for girls.

The greatest changes between fourth and sixth grades in how free time was filled were in time spent watching television and time spent with friends. In the log for this study the two activities were mutually exclusive. Previous studies regarding the amount of time spent watching television were divided over what impact such viewing has on reading. Heath and DeWitt (1994) contended that while young children are likely to watch TV, those in the middle school age shun television viewing for the opportunity to be with friends. This researcher had anticipated an increase in time with friends as the students approach

adolescence, but there was a much greater increase than expected. Boys' time with friends other than playing games increased by half between fourth and sixth grades, jumping from 5.8 to 8.5 hours a week; girls' times more than doubled, jumping from 5.5 hours to 12.7 hours a week. Fourth grade boys and girls spent 15% of time with friends. Sixth grade boys recorded 20% as compared with 33% for sixth grade girls. At the same time television viewing by boys also increased substantially, with sixth boys watching five hours more a week than fourth grade boys. Sixth grade girls' viewing time increased 2.1 hours per week over fourth grade girls'.

While attempting to determine the greatest differences in how boys and girls spend their time, it was anticipated that boys spend more time participating in organized sports. This was only slightly true in each grade. Boys did record substantially more time engaged in "games," which included playing with friends or family or doing hobbies, 4.4 hours more for fourth grade boys and 6.3 hours for boys in sixth grade.

Surprisingly, sixth grade boys declared almost three hours a week more than sixth grade girls attending to personal care.

When students were asked to rate themselves as readers, any kind of reading was to be counted, no matter how casual. Nevertheless, it was surprising that only three fourth graders and nine sixth graders rated themselves as non-readers, with twice the number of boys doing so in each grade as girls. Although two boys and one girl in fourth grade claimed not to read, only one boy and no girls logged zero hours of leisure reading. Among the nine sixth graders who denied reading, only two logged zero hours. But seven self-proclaimed readers in sixth grade logged no reading during the week that the logs were maintained. It may be that they did no reading at all during that one week. It is also likely that reading shared a half hour block on the grid with other activities, such as eating breakfast or watching TV. Students had been instructed to pick the one activity they pursued the most within each block; therefore, some activities were not logged.

When asked whether the respondents thought their friends read for pleasure, only five fourth grade boys and no girls said none of their friends read. No fourth graders said they chose not to read because their friends do not read. Only two sixth grade boys gave that as a reason they do not read, and they gave other reasons as well. This researcher had

expected to find a strong relationship between respondents' interest in reading and how they perceived their friends pursuit of reading, and there was none.

There was little relationship between the amount of reading done by all participants and the perceived availability of materials of interest. Only one fourth grader, a girl, and five sixth graders, one girl and four boys, said there were no materials written that might appeal to them.

Much of the literature suggested a parallel between adults reading at home and the likelihood of children following their model (Canfield, 1999; Copperman, 1986; Henry, 1974; Krashen, 1993; Martin, 1991). Only one respondent stated that there is no leisure reader in his home. While most of the adult readers, parents or grandparents, named by the students were female, no relationship was noted between male or female role models and the gender of the respondent. For example, boys who read had a balanced distribution of female and male adult readers in the home, as did boys and girls who claimed they did not read.

Students recorded frequency of library visits, even if they were there to use the computers or stop by with a parent. The accessibility of books and other reading materials was the focus of this question. Only two sixth grade boys said they never visit the library, even though each school in this study has a library and there is a local public library within easy access to students. All other respondents had the opportunity to browse or borrow materials if they should choose. Therefore, the availability and accessibility of appropriate reading materials were not factors contributing to students not reading.

#### Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether sixth grade boys read less than boys in fourth grade. That hypothesis was supported among the groups participating in the study. But there were significant limitations. Two different sets of students were being compared. A more meaningful future study would compare the reading habits of the same group of students over several years, from fourth to sixth grades, when time constraints governing the research are not a factor. Do the same students, boys and girls, read less as they move from elementary school through middle school?

A factor that may have skewed some of the results of this study may have been the particular week the students were asked to keep their logs. Several students pointed out that they had just completed one sports season the preceding week and the next week sign-ups would be held for a different sport. This may have accounted for the time spent in organized sports being less than anticipated. However, reading time would not have been significantly altered, except to assume that the students involved would have had more time to read than if the sports season were under way.

Another possible study in the future would address students' reading habits over a longer period of time, perhaps at different times of the year. It would be worth while to observe how leisure reading is indulged in the summer, for example, when there are fewer, if any, school demands, and leisure time is more abundant.

In this study, time spent with friends was included under "games," "time with friends," and "sports," for example. But "games" also included time spent alone on a computer or doing a hobby. Another study might focus on different categories of time, perhaps examining time with friends, time with family, and time alone.

This study gave only a cursory look at the possible influences affecting student reading—peer pressure, reading choices, the accessibility of appropriate reading materials, and family role models. Once it has been determined that boys read less in middle school than in elementary school, it is logical then to investigate why.

Are there materials of interest available to boys at home, in the library, or in the classroom? Are there books and periodicals at home? Are they read? Who reads them? Are boys encouraged to pick up any reading materials that parents read? Are there materials of appropriate reading levels and appealing to a variety of interests in the house? What is on the library shelves? Only award winners? Only novels? Or are there periodicals, jokes, how-to books, and more to appeal to most interests? Are they available for circulation?

Is time for free reading provided at home or at school? Is free, sustained silent reading time available during the school day? Are all students encouraged to participate? Is free reading truly free, or are there restrictions on the kinds of reading permitted?

Do parents and teachers model reading? What is the significance of same-sex reading models? Do boys perceive girls and women as readers, and boys and men as

doers? Are girls given books as gifts, whereas boys are given sports equipment or a model kit? Is the perception that reading is a feminine activity inadvertently fostered in such a manner by well-meaning adults?

Is any kind of reading chosen by boys honored by adults, or are some kinds of reading scorned, such as that of comics, horror, or sports magazines? Does a teacher or librarian take a book from the hand of a boy and tell him it is too childish or otherwise “inappropriate” for him to choose? Such adults may very well be sending a message that boys’ choices are inferior, unaware that they are doing so, even as they believe they are acting in the boys’ best interests. Do boys then alter their reading selections to suit the adult expectations, or do they opt not to read at all?

What are the implications for boys and girls who do not read other than the minimum that is required by teachers? There are many studies that explore the impact of reading fluency on grades and standardized tests. Is assigned reading sufficient to attain an acceptable level of reading fluency, or is there a strong correlation between those who read beyond assignments and academic success? What is the correlation between academic success as measured by reading fluency and success in adult life? The classic *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) asserted that independent reading is the major source of knowledge about the world, its people, politics, and philosophies. Is this still true in today’s visual society? Is a broad knowledge base something everyone truly needs?

This paper only represents a first step into a vastly complex field of study. There are myriad avenues to explore to determine reasons why some students read and others do not, and still more to ascertain the value of reading in school, at work, in the community, and for personal enjoyment.

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## Appendix

March 6, 2000

Dear Parents,

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Masters of Arts program at Rowan University, I am conducting research on the use of leisure time by students in the fourth and sixth grades. I am particularly interested in the difference between leisure activities pursued by boys and by girls and how those pursuits may change as the students pass from elementary to middle school.

I am requesting that each student in grades four and six maintain a log for one week to record how time outside school is spent. At the end of the week I will collect the logs. I will analyze the data and draw conclusions related to demands on our students' time outside school, as well as how they fill their free time. The log is designed to be completed in a very few minutes each day. Any assistance you can offer your child in recording his or her activities will be appreciated. Most especially, I will appreciate your encouragement to maintain the log for the week.

Participation in the research is strictly voluntary. All respondents are assured complete anonymity and confidentiality. Your child's grades will not be affected in any way by participating or not participating in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at the Seaview Library at 926-9626. You can contact my professor, Dr. Holly Willett, at Rowan University at 1-856-256-4759, or email her at [willett@rowan.edu](mailto:willett@rowan.edu).

Thank you for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Linda Kissling  
Library Media Specialist

## Reading Attitudes of Fourth and Sixth Grade Students

1. Check the word that describes you ☐ boy ☐ girl

2. What grade are you in? ☐ 4th ☐ 6th

3. Do you read for fun? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*If yes*

What do you like to read?

☐ Books

☐ Magazines

☐ Newspapers

☐ Manuals, how-to's

☐ Comics

☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

*If no*

Why not?

☐ Too busy, no time

☐ Too boring

☐ Nothing in the house to read

☐ No good books written for me

☐ My friends don't read

☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do your friends read for fun?

☐ Yes, most do ☐ Some do ☐ No, none at all

5. In your house, who reads in their free time? (Check all that apply).

☐ Mom ☐ Older sister(s) ☐ Younger sister(s) ☐ Grandmother

☐ Dad ☐ Older brother(s) ☐ Younger brother(s) ☐ Grandfather

☐ No one reads ☐ Other (Please say who) \_\_\_\_\_

6. How often do you visit the library, either at school or the public library?

☐ Once a week or more ☐ Twice a month ☐ Once a month

☐ Less than once a month ☐ Never

	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
7:30-8:00							
8:00-8:30							
8:30-9:00	X	X	X	X	X		
9:00-9:30	X	X	X	X	X		
9:30-10:00	X	X	X	X	X		
10:00-10:30	X	X	X	X	X		
10:30-11:00	X	X	X	X	X		
11:00-11:30	X	X	X	X	X		
11:30-12:00	X	X	X	X	X		
12:00-12:30	X	X	X	X	X		
12:30-1:00	X	X	X	X	X		
1:00-1:30	X	X	X	X	X		
1:30-2:00	X	X	X	X	X		
2:00-2:30	X	X	X	X	X		
2:30-3:00	X	X	X	X	X		
3:00-3:30							
3:30-4:00							
4:00-4:30							
4:30-5:00							
5:00-5:30							
5:30-6:00							
6:00-6:30							
6:30-7:00							
7:00-7:30							
7:30-8:00							
8:00-8:30							
8:30-9:00							
9:00-9:30							
9:30-10:00							
10:00-10:30							
10:30-11:00							

Please circle gender and grade

Boy Girl 4th 6th

Fill in the grid each day using the following symbols to record what you do with your time outside school. X is the time you are in school. If you do more than one activity in a half-hour block, note the one you did longest.

H Homework  
CH Chores  
P Personal care – bathe, brush teeth, change clothes, etc.  
E Eat meals  
SP Sports – games or practice  
M Music – lessons or practice  
R Read for fun – books, magazines, etc.  
TV Watch television  
G Games with friends, family, video & computer games  
CL Club activities, scouts, church group, etc.  
F Time with friends – visit, phone, etc.  
SL Sleep  
T Trip, special outing with family, friends  
RS Religious services, Sunday school, etc.  
O Other – Please note on the back of this paper  
Consider time you spend in the car – do you read, play games, listen to music, etc.?

Please turn in this log at the library or to your teacher.

Thank you!